

Feature Interview / By Avraham Weissman

Hamodia interviews Warren L. Miller, Chairman of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, a federal agency established to help protect and preserve burial places, memorials, and historic buildings such as synagogues in Eastern and Central Europe.

While you are perhaps best known on the international scene for your work on the Commission over the past 18 years, you are a former federal prosecutor, and still an active lawyer.

Yes, I was an assistant U.S. attorney in the District of Columbia where I became one of the senior trial prosecutors. I still practice law, but the work of the Commission — for which I am not paid — takes a great deal of my time. I have had to turn away business from time to time because of commitments I had for the Commission, involving travel abroad, giving speeches, and other activities.

What made you decide to get involved with the Commission in the first place and what motivates you?

I was called by two officials in the White House of the first President Bush who asked me if I wanted to serve in the Administration. I advised them I wanted to do something regarding the Holocaust. They told me about the Commission and I was honored to be appointed by the President to serve on it.

At the time, most of the members were focused on restoring Jewish cemeteries. I took the position that Holocaust sites, the camps and the mass graves, were the largest Jewish cemeteries in Europe. The victims had been humiliated, terrorized and died without dignity. We needed to recall their deaths and honor them by creating

memorials at these infamous sites. Eventually, the other members endorsed my view.

I have distant relatives who disappeared in the Holocaust. But what motivates me is the barbarity and the enormity of the crime. The more I learn, and the more I study about what happened, I'm just staggered. Years ago, I realized this is something that I wanted to devote a part of my life to, to somehow, in some small way, help to correct the monumental injustice that was done. It's critical work, especially as the survivors and witnesses are dying off. Within 10 to 15 years, no one will be able to tell us where these sites are located. There are still many that have not been identified. We're talking about thousands of mass graves that remain hidden.

You assumed your current position as Chairman nine years ago. Obviously we can't cover all that time in one interview, but perhaps you can touch upon some of the highlights of your work. You have negotiated and signed 19 agreements with foreign nations. How difficult was it for you to get these agreements with these countries? How much pressure did you have to apply to get them to agree?

Each country is different but all were challenging. Some were less problematic; others were extremely difficult. For instance, Poland was one of the toughest, but most important. I got Colin Powell involved, who was Secretary of the State at the



time, and we were able to get an agreement after years of negotiation.

Germany was also very problematic, because of restrictions on cultural issues set forth in their national constitution that delegates authority to the many state governments of Germany.

The Baltic states were also very difficult, because these countries were complicit in the Holocaust and were also former states of the Soviet Union. In Lithuania, Jewish sites were terribly desecrated — with government assistance, under the Nazis and the Communists. Those governments understood that entering into a bilateral agreement would shed light on past events that would be embarrassing for their respective nations.

We are continuing to seek agreements with certain other

countries. We're meeting with very stiff resistance from Turkey and Russia. The Greeks have told me, "We don't need an agreement, we take care of our own cultural sites." I have gotten used to being told "No" countless times, but I am persistent. It's a long, drawn out process to get each agreement.

Once you reach an agreement with a country, how does the implementation process work? The follow-up — is there some sort of monitoring system to see that countries are keeping their commitments?

Usually the media or the U.S. ambassador in the country advises us that a problem is occurring, such as a desecration, and then we intervene on a diplomatic level. I'll call the foreign ambassador in Washington, or go over to the country and meet with the cultural or foreign minister or even the prime minister or the president, depending on what the problem is and what redress we are seeking.

I try to keep a positive relationship with as many of the foreign countries as possible, so that when we seek action, we are viewed as an entity they can trust, as a partner and not as the superpower trying to push them around. Often I am contacted by Jewish organizations that have a restoration project in one of these countries or who learn of desecration and ask for our assistance.

Additionally, Members of Congress sometimes will advise us that there is a problem in a

certain locale involving a cemetery or synagogue. Often, we have been able to stop ongoing desecrations or enlist the help of the foreign government to stop the destruction. In Poland, we learned that an inappropriate establishment was operating on the grounds of a historic Jewish cemetery. I brought this to the attention of the Prime Minister and quietly working behind the scenes with his senior staff, we closed it down and had the cemetery turned over to the Jewish community. We got the result we wanted by not grandstanding and embarrassing the Poles.

Tell us briefly about the memorials that you erected in concentration camps and other sites. Who funded these memorials?

We usually do the fundraising ourselves. Occasionally, the cost will be shared with other organizations or a foreign government. An example is the "Little Camp" memorial at Buchenwald, Germany.

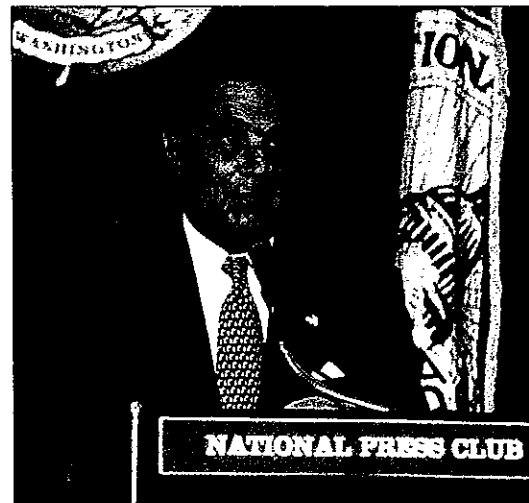
When I went to Buchenwald as a member of the Commission — long before becoming Chairman, I asked the director, "Where is the Little Camp?" The worst atrocities and conditions occurred at that site. He shrugged and said, "Well, it's over there," and he pointed to a forest. I asked why there wasn't a memorial, and he replied, "Eventually, we'll get to it."

I knew that if we didn't do it, the Germans wouldn't; it was

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L-R: Rabbi Chaskel Besser, z"l; Chairman Warren L. Miller; Prime Minister of Poland Leszek Miller; Ronald S. Lauder. Chairman Miller is presenting the Polish prime minister with a letter regarding desecration of a Jewish cemetery.



Chairman Warren L. Miller addressing the National Press Club.

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never going to be memorialized. I later learned they had a restriction on any new memorials at the camp.

It took me seven years to accomplish that project. I raised substantial amounts of money from individual donors and then I told the Germans that they needed to match it. At first, they said they had no money. But, eventually, they did contribute half the cost. President Obama, Chancellor Merkel, and Elie Wiesel visited the memorial in June 2009. The Little Camp is where Elie Wiesel's father died, and where [Elie] was liberated from.

Another project our Commission was involved in is in Romania. When I first visited Romania 8 years ago, I proposed to senior government officials that they establish a national Holocaust memorial in Bucharest. Romania was the second-largest killer of Jews during the Holocaust, after Germany. After years of lobbying for a memorial by myself and others, including a formal recommendation for a memorial by an international commission studying the Holocaust in Romania, a Holocaust memorial was dedicated a few months ago in the center of Bucharest. It is located on a very important historic site. It is opposite the former Ministry of Interior building,

which was the government agency that issued the orders for the deportation of the Jews. In this case, the Government of Romania funded the entire \$7.5 million cost of the memorial.

But, in most projects we've done, in camps and massacre sites, the money is raised solely by members of the Commission, through private donations, and there is no contribution from the host government or from local authorities.

Another example of our work is a memorial in Kielce, Poland that the Commission sponsored. Kielce was where an infamous pogrom occurred on July 4, 1946, a year after the Holocaust ended. At that time, a rumor started that the Jews had kidnapped a Christian boy to use his blood to make *matzah*. A mass killing of Jews occurred, involving police and some soldiers who assisted the mob. That was the event that convinced most Jewish Holocaust survivors that they couldn't return to their homes, prompting mass immigration to Israel, the United States and other countries.

Among the numerous accomplishments of the Commission, are the surveys of Jewish cemeteries and synagogues in Europe that are of particular use for individual researchers.

We have done surveys in Poland, Ukraine, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Lithuania, Romania, Bulgaria and else-

where. We hire contractors in the country to assess the condition of the graves, collect data and report on the general condition of a cemetery. We then compile all of that and publish it in a report that we give to the host government. We also make the information available online, so that anyone interested in seeing what happened to their ancestral sites can do so. If that person wants to restore it, having that data is a helpful first step.

I understand that most of the cemetery restorations have been done by private individuals who want to preserve and protect a site of their ancestors. Have you ever had any U.S. government official undertake a project?

Yes. When I was on a trip to Slovakia I visited with Ronald Weiser, the U.S. ambassador in Bratislava, Slovakia. We were discussing his Jewish heritage. He thereafter went to his family's ancestral hometown in Poland and restored the cemetery with the assistance and cooperation of the Commission. It was a very enriching experience for him.

There are probably thousands of Americans who might be interested in doing that. It's a labor of love, and usually appreciated by the residents of the town or city. There are groups that we collaborate with that can assist if someone is interested in doing such a project. Some are foreign entities, others are located in New York.

What's next? What are you focusing on now?

The focus of the Commission now is in trying to implement as many projects as possible. I have a million-dollar commitment from a donor to build a visitor's center at Treblinka, the second-largest Holocaust site, where more than 850,000 Jews were slaughtered in 9 months. It needs a visitor's center to educate people who come to the site about what happened. It needs basic facilities such as restrooms. Hopefully, educational seminars will be held there as well. We are very frustrated with the Polish government in terms of getting them to act on our proposal.

We have numerous ongoing projects, including in Russia and Ukraine. We are also building a national Holocaust memorial in Albania, a Muslim country that protected its Jews during WWII. A member of the Commission has donated \$50,000 for the memorial and a prominent American architect, himself a Holocaust survivor, is designing the memorial and donating his services. The Albanian government is enthusiastically embracing this project. We are also completing a project in Bucharest, Romania, where, a year ago, there was an attack on the main Jewish cemetery in the capital. The vandals smashed, probably with sledge hammers, 131 tombstones. It was a coordinated attack. We are currently

restoring the tombstones, and I have asked the Romanian ambassador to request the president and the prime minister of the country to attend the dedication ceremony this fall, to send an unequivocal message that anti-Semitism will not be tolerated in their country.

You mentioned that you are encouraging Americans to do their own research, and to consider undertaking restoration projects. At what point should they be reaching out to the Commission?

We welcome calls from people who understand the reality that they will need to either contribute the money or raise it for a project to be done. Oftentimes, we get calls from someone who is very well-intentioned, who wants to restore a cemetery, and they assume that the U.S. Government will pay for it. The U.S. Government does not provide money for these projects.

For those who are able to finance a project, they should know that contributions to the Commission are tax deductible. We will be very happy to assist them and put them in touch with the right people in a particular country, or collaborate with them to implement the project. It is not difficult, and I urge your readers to consider doing a project. It is a noble thing to do, and they will enjoy the experience.

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